

Tested in Fire: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Moment of Christian Witness

The present state of Christianity has been a theme close to the heart of Hans Urs von Balthasar. He suggests to take the lantern of Diogenes and to find among the great number of those who profess to be Christians a few who genuinely are!¹ The faith of the Christian is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold.² His interest is to investigate what makes it worthwhile being a Christian and to avoid some partial misunderstanding or complete misapprehension that Christ is no more than the supreme example of natural man or that Christianity is only the noblest form of natural religion.³ Balthasar's method consists in establishing Christ crucified as the pivot with which the life of the Christian revolves.

"It is to the cross", he says, "that the Christian is challenged to follow his master."⁴ And yet again, "whoever does not daily take up his cross" cannot be Jesus' disciple.⁵ Balthasar's preference to explain the nature of the Christian in the light of "God's movement toward us" rather than "our movement toward God" is clearly manifest.⁶ The Christian, he insists, is "the guardian of the metaphysical wonder" who is called to

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¹ Diogenes is said to have gone looking for an honest man around Athens with a lantern at daytime. For further reference, see R. Bracht Branham, "Diogenes of Sinope (412/403-324/321 BC)," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London-New York, 1998), 3: 90-91.

² See 1 Pet 1,7; 1 Cor 3,13.

³ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology* (San Francisco, 1989), 161.

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child* (San Francisco, 1991), 57.

⁵ See Lk 9,23.

⁶ See Von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, 162.

bear witness and be prepared to confess Christ in the world today.⁷ In the words of the Second Vatican Council, it means to “be prepared to make this profession of faith even in the midst of persecutions, which will never be lacking to the Church, in following the way of the cross.”⁸

This paper attempts to present Balthasar’s understanding of leading a Christian life in terms of the loving Triune God manifested in Jesus Christ. First, it starts by highlighting God’s act of love for humanity. Here Balthasar’s theology appears at once as one of wonder and gift. Secondly, in front of all this ineffable mystery, the Christian never ceases to wonder and contemplate Christ. Thirdly, there is a decisive moment wherein the Christian “should be one who offers up his life in the service of his fellow man because he owes his life to Christ crucified.”⁹ Fourthly, it is seen that the testing by fire of the Christian’s genuine faith is no easy task. It calls for obedience and surrender. Lastly, Balthasar’s emphasis on the moment of Christian witness as a “gift” *par excellence* is brought to light. It will be seen that the Christian, purified by fire, “lend[s] his own love” so that the logic of God’s universal engagement with the world in the love of Jesus Christ continues to be manifest today as it did in the past.

The Act of Love

To Balthasar, there can be no authentic living of the gospel of Christ that is unfamiliar with the painful joy of the Paschal Mystery. “To become a Christian”, he writes in *Mysterium Paschale* recalling a paraphrasing of Pope Leo the Great, “is to come to the cross.”¹⁰ Balthasar’s main idea is that the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ - lying at the very centre of Christian faith and discipleship - manifests God’s supreme act of love.

The Cross is both the starting point for Christ’s followers and the goal toward which he expressly invites his followers to strive.¹¹ It represents God’s act of love through Christ that “paves the way” and requires our following of him.¹² The cross,

⁷ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* (San Francisco, 1991), 5:648-649.

⁸ Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁰ John O’Connor, Foreword to *Person to Person*, ed. John S. Bonnici (New York, 1999), xi.

¹¹ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness* (San Francisco, 1994), 18.

¹² See Heb 12,2.

explains Balthasar, stands as the central symbol for faith in Jesus Christ and represents the supreme testimony of love to all. He insists that no path of redemption can make a detour around the scandal of the cross. Referring to the scriptural basis, Balthasar makes the following question: “why was it that Jesus Christ prophesied no other fate for his disciples and followers than his own: persecution, failure and suffering to the point of death?”¹³

The answer is clear. The fate of Jesus and his disciples *is* the story of redemption and becomes the creative source of new life. It produces the pattern of Christian living, the paradoxical form of Christian existence, and the peculiar shape of Christian hope. All of this depends on the initial act of love. According to Vatican II, since Christ died for all, the whole of humanity is touched, directly and indirectly, by the Paschal Mystery.¹⁴ Human beings are touched directly, in so far, as they become members of the Christian community through baptism, and indirectly in so far as they follow “the dictates of conscience” and/or “strive to live a good life,”¹⁵ which demands a kind of anonymous dying and rising that finds its ultimate meaning in the Paschal mystery of Christ.

The existential attitude of the Christian should be shaped and determined by this *a priori* element (see Rom 6,3-11). Christ’s dying for humanity is thus presented as an *a priori* of the Christian attitude, which is thereby stamped as perfect.¹⁶ Josef Schmid comments that suffering in its manifold forms – being parted from one’s dearest friends, being persecuted and finally martyred – is intrinsic to the fate of the disciples.¹⁷ In this light, the second Vatican Council says:

Since Jesus, the Son of God, manifested his charity by laying down his life for us, no one has greater love than he who lays down his life for Christ and his brothers (cf. 1 Jn 3,6; Jn 15, 13). From the earliest times, then, some Christians have been called upon – and some will always be called upon – to give this supreme testimony of love to all men, but especially to persecutors. The Church, therefore, considers martyrdom

¹³ Von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, 13.

¹⁴ See Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

¹⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, 16.

¹⁶ See *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁷ See *Ibid.*, 20; Josef Schmid, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus übersetzt und erklärt* (Regensburg, 1956), as cited in, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, 20.

as an exceptional gift and as the highest proof of love. By martyrdom, a disciple is transformed into an image of his master who freely accepted death on behalf of the world's salvation; he perfects that image even to the shedding of blood. Though few are presented with such an opportunity, nevertheless all must be prepared to confess Christ before men, and to follow him along the way of the cross through the persecutions which the Church will never fail to suffer.¹⁸

A second point here is that God's act of love is carried out for all of humanity. The death of Christ is for the Christian the opening-up of the glory of divine love, and to understand his position as a believer in the light of this death means to interpret his position as arising not from a marginal or borderline situation but from the absolute centre of reality.¹⁹ Those who willingly follow Christ put him first, regarding him as "worth more" than "father and mother, son and daughter" (Mt 10, 37), but he who puts Jesus first also chooses the Cross as the place where he will not eventually, but most certainly die.²⁰ Christian belief, then, means the unconditional resolve to surrender one's life for Christ's sake. Balthasar says:

Just as the triune God acquired an ascendancy over the God in one person through an unfathomable love that itself had to be found of love (for he did not need us), and as a result, fell from eternal life into the world of death and was forsaken by God, so Christian belief can be only an ascendancy that man, responding gratefully and showing himself thankful to God, acquires over himself by giving evidence that he has understood God's action.²¹

The glory of the sovereign love of God in Christ, as manifested in the concrete events of his life, death and resurrection, leads the Christian to be absorbed into a sense of mystery.²² It is no wonder that Balthasar's Christology has been compared, suggestively, to the iconography of Andrei Rublev and George Rouault.²³ A great work of art is

¹⁸ *Lumen Gentium* 42.

¹⁹ See Von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, 27-28.

²⁰ See *Ibid.*, 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

²² See Aidan Nichols, Introduction to *Mysterium Paschale*, ed. Hans Urs von Balthasar (Edinburgh, 1990), 6.

²³ See Robert Vander Gucht and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Bilan de la Théologie du vingtième siècle* (Paris, 1970), 686.

capable of drawing the observer into itself, of touching and changing him. Christ, as the point of origin and the ultimate horizon, permeates in the whole of Balthasar's vision, the explicit program which he continually propounded from the beginning of his ministry to the end of his life.²⁴

Balthasar himself explains that his encounters with contemporary figures²⁵ in the Church strengthened his determination, "to display the Christian message in its unsurpassable greatness *id quo maius cogitari nequit* because it is ... God's deepest love in the splendour of his dying so that all might live beyond themselves for him."²⁶ Balthasar's brilliant re-reading of these authors was grounded in his remarkable ability to capture the unique core, impulse and dynamic direction of the thought of each dialogue partner.²⁷

Balthasar is determined to present the Christian faith as a whole so that people today can contemplate its beauty and splendour. John R. Sachs describes Balthasar's theology as the attempt to get to the centre, to the indivisible whole or *gestalt* of the mystery of God's trinitarian love, revealed in Jesus Christ and communicated in history through the Spirit in the Church.²⁸ This complements Balthasar's description of his theology as a method of "inductive convergence" or "a method of in-folding." Moreover, in a similar manner, Werner Löser and Michael Albus call Balthasar's work a "theological phenomenology"²⁹ and a "trinitarian integration"³⁰ respectively.

²⁴ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work in Retrospect* (San Francisco, 1993), 50. For the beginning of his life, see Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele*, 3 vols. (Salzburg, 1937-1939), where "the eschatological thinking of German writers was depicted in the light of Christ." For the end of von Balthasar's life see the remark tinged with sorrow for the world: "Humanity will prefer to renounce all philosophical questions – in Marxism, or positivism of all stripes, rather than accept a philosophy that finds its final response only in the revelation of Christ." *My Work in Retrospect*, 118.

²⁵ Von Balthasar's religious vision was formed not only by his creative dialogues with the great contemporary thinkers but also with those from the past: the Eastern Fathers, especially Origen, medieval theologians including Aquinas and Bonaventure; founders of religious orders, primarily Ignatius, and literary figures ranging from Dante to Hopkins.

²⁶ Von Balthasar, *My Work in Retrospect*, 50.

²⁷ See James J. Bacik, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Contemplative Spirit in Contemporary Theologians* (Illinois, 1989), 54.

²⁸ See John R. Sachs, "Deus Semper Major," *Gregorianum* 74 (1993): 633.

²⁹ Werner Löser, *Im Geiste des Origenes. Hans Urs von Balthasar als Interpret der Theologie der Kirchenväter* (Freiburg, 1976), 11f, as cited in John R. Sachs, "Deus Semper Major," 633.

³⁰ Michael Albus, *Die Wahrheit ist Liebe* (Freiburg, 1976), 28f, 181, as cited in Sachs, "Deus Semper Major," 633.

In view of this, the Christian is called to a contemplative-meditative “infolding” into the mystery of God’s love before there can be a real unfolding of its inner depths. The act of love necessitates a two-fold movement of infolding and unfolding. Before the Christian is asked to bear witness at a given moment, he is to encounter the living form of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. This idea leads us to the next section concerning the loving contemplation of faith upon the personal Word which God has spoken to the world in Jesus Christ.³¹ In other words, the Christian is invited to contemplate Jesus Christ, who in the paschal mystery, is the icon of the triune God. Contemplation, Balthasar insists, is no merely passive, unaffected observation, but rather standing in awe in front of the mystery of God’s love and bearing witness to it.

The Christian Never Ceases to Wonder

A sense of mystery pervades Balthasar’s writings. The Christian wonders at the ineffable mystery of God revealed to humanity in Jesus Christ. “For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ.”³² It is God’s revelation in history and not God’s hiding from humanity that arouses wonder. One thinks of his plan for the fullness of time, which is nothing less than “to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.”³³

If the centre of Christian faith is Jesus Christ as the appearance of the invisible God, then, according to Balthasar, the Christian faith has of necessity a contemplative function. Balthasar’s main idea here concerns the Christian’s contemplation of Christ. Balthasar is fond of citing in this context the preface for the feast of Christmas: “Through the mystery of the incarnate Word the new light of your brightness has shone onto the eyes of our mind, that knowing God visibly, we might be snatched up by this into the love of invisible things.”³⁴

John O’Donnell explains that if by virtue of the incarnation God has become visible, then it belongs to the nature of Christian faith to contemplate God’s glory in the flesh.³⁵

³¹ See Sachs, “Deus Semper Major,” 631.

³² Eph 1, 9.

³³ Eph 1,10.

³⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* (San Francisco, 1982), 1:119-120.

³⁵ See John O’Donnell, *Hans Urs von Balthasar* (London, 2000), 18.

It is above all Saint John, Balthasar's favourite scriptural author, who accentuates this dimension of faith. Hence, the mystery of the Christian faith consists in the fact that God who is Beauty itself and who dwells in inaccessible light has become visible to us in his Son Jesus Christ.

Believing consists in looking upon Jesus and seeing in him the glory of the Father. Jesus, "indivisible Man-God," is at once the object and model of Christian contemplation.³⁶ Henri de Lubac holds that the books *The Heart of the World* and *Prayer* authored by Balthasar are an excellent illustration of the idea of Christian contemplation put into action. In his article in tribute to Balthasar, de Lubac quotes a passage of great value in that it provokes reflection on the primordial importance of contemplation in the life of the apostle. He says:

All we have been able to attest to other men, our brothers, of the divine reality comes from contemplation; of Jesus Christ, of our Church. One cannot hope to announce in a lasting and effective manner the contemplation of Christ and the Church if one does not oneself participate in them. No more than a man who has never loved is capable of speaking usefully of love. Even the smallest problem in the world will not be solved by one who has not met this world; no Christian will be an effective apostle if he does not announce, firm as the 'rock' Peter, what he has seen and heard: 'We did not bring you the knowledge of the power and advent of our Lord Jesus Christ on the warrant of human fables, but because we have been privileged to see his majesty. He received from God the Father honour and glory ... This voice (of the Father) we have heard when we were with him on the holy mountain ...!'³⁷

A second point here is that by focusing his gaze upon the incarnate and crucified Christ, the Christian is drawn into the mystery of the eternal Godhead. Balthasar explains that the Christian must return ever anew to this wellspring of contemplation. In giving people Christ to contemplate, says Balthasar, God has presented them with a concrete vision of the life of the Trinity, a vision contained in full measure in the grace and earnest following of Christ. The vision in question is simply the interior

³⁶ See Henri de Lubac, "Witness of Christ in the Church," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler (San Francisco, 1991), 278.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 278-279.

illumination of obedience in faith practised with Christ towards the Father in the Spirit. Thus, in his view, despite being focused exclusively on Christ, Christian contemplation involves all three Persons of the Trinity. Hence, while contemplating Christ, the object of Christian contemplation is, in fact God. Balthasar says:

Contemplation's object is God, and God is triune life. But as far as we are concerned, we only know of this triune life from the Son's incarnation. Consequently we must not abstract from the incarnation in our contemplation. We cannot contemplate God's triune life in itself; if we did, we would sink into a vacuum, a world without substance, into conceptual mathematics or day-dreaming.³⁸

Human beings, Balthasar holds, are supposed to imitate Christ's relation to God the Father through the Spirit. He contends that as the life of the Trinity is revealed in the contemplation of Christ, likewise there is a Trinitarian dimension to the imitation of Christ. He explains that imitating Christ in this way, they will experience "the irruption within [them] of the inner life of God." Balthasar explains that God gives human beings a concrete vision of triune life by involving them in it through grace and their serious discipleship of Christ.³⁹

This brings us to another interesting point, that of connecting with God. Balthasar describes contemplative prayer as "seeing and hearing God." It is a "looking to God." He explains that no Christian can arrive at this without putting oneself at God's disposal. Balthasar explains that obedience is an essential component. Fundamentally, for Balthasar, prayer is a communication between God and the individual praying (the soul).⁴⁰ Balthasar holds that contemplative prayer consists in a communication with God that is also an encounter with God. It is a conversation in which God's word has the initiative and the individual, for the moment, can be nothing more than a listener.⁴¹

One of the most striking characteristics of Balthasar's writing on the Trinity and Christian spirituality is his dramatic, dynamic concept of God. He stresses the radical

³⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer* (San Francisco, 1986), 193.

³⁹ See *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴⁰ See *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴¹ See *Ibid.*, 15.

freedom, newness and fruitfulness of the trinitarian God of Christianity, precisely in reference to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the divine freedom in its ever-greater fullness, God in God's ability to ever "exceed" God's self in the infinite fullness of love. "The essence of God is to be 'ever-greater'."⁴² If according to the form of Jesus, Christian existence is life-in-mission, life in loving obedience to God's word, then it must be grounded in constant prayer, since God's word as mediated by the Spirit comes to us ever-new, unpredictable and utterly free. Thus, the significance and necessity of prayer as the foundation of life in the Spirit is grounded ultimately in the ever-greater freedom of God.

The object of contemplation is God, and ultimately the only appropriate response to God's revelation is an attitude of adoration and surrender. Here, Balthasar quotes Elizabeth of the Trinity: "Adoration is love overwhelmed by the beauty, the power, the immense grandeur of the loved object. Love then falls into a kind of faint, into a full and profound silence. It is also the final effort of a soul that is overflowing and can no longer speak."⁴³ Moreover, he continues that prayer leads to abandonment, which in turn leads to pure service of God. He says:

Through prayer we should come to perceive and savour God within us (the *interne sentire et gustare* of Ignatius). And yet, in prayer, we should not be seeking any enjoyment but rather the pure service of God. In order for us to learn how to unite both things, God takes us into his school, which consists in a continual alternation of consolations and abandonments, until we have learned how one can even enjoy in a wholly selfless manner and how to experience enjoyment itself as service.⁴⁴

Balthasar adds that the contemplative, trinitarian mystery which the Church gazes upon and which it cherishes in its heart, is not to be belittled by much talking; it brings forth its genuine fruit in those who follow Christ into suffering.⁴⁵ Living the Christian faith then, for Balthasar, means contemplating the glory of God as well as becoming like Christ. In this final point, it becomes clear that for Balthasar "becoming like Christ" is possible by leading one's life "in him". It is by being "in Christ" that, here and now,

⁴² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologik* (Einsiedeln, 1987), 3:219, as cited in Sachs, "Deus Semper Major," 639.

⁴³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms* (San Francisco, 1995), 12.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁵ See Von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 197.

the Christian can share in the greatest “event” of all – the divine and ever new event of love between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that the Christian perceives this new realm opening up for him. Walking in the crucified and risen Christ, “the Christian way of salvation does not exclude its corporality, the world and history, but rather transforms them through living out his commandment, ‘love one another, as I have loved you.’”⁴⁶

Adopting the language of the theatre, Balthasar writes of the drama of human history unfolding within the greatest drama of all – the drama of love between Jesus Christ and the Father in the Holy Spirit, which we read about in the gospel. There are two biblical icons that express this – Jesus’ cry on the cross, representing the depths of human despair, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and the Easter declaration, expressing the Father’s infinite love that fills every emptiness: “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.” It is within this dialogue of love between the Father and the Son that, here and now, “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17, 28).⁴⁷ Certainly, in Balthasar’s view, all of man’s history finds its “place” in the drama of redemption, the drama of God sending his only Son among humanity. In the words of Simeon the New Theologian, “the Father is the home, the Son is the doorway, and the Spirit is the key.”⁴⁸

Therefore, only in becoming like Christ can the Christian be an intentional response to God’s work in salvation. This leads Balthasar to speak of two fundamental impulses that are his “missionary” concern for the whole public realm of life and his conviction that Christianity is only fruitful for the world if it lives as a freely available sign of costly discipleship.⁴⁹ The following section examines the credibility of love alone wherein the Christian is “tested in fire”. It is at a given moment, precisely when he loves that “[he] pass[es] from death to life,”⁵⁰ a life in God.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁷ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* (San Francisco, 1990), 2:284.

⁴⁸ Simeon the New Theologian, *Catechesis* xxxiii, as cited in Piero Coda, *Dio Uno e Trino* (Milano, 1993), 207-208.

⁴⁹ See Mark A. McIntosh, *Christology from Within* (Notre Dame, 2000), 3.

⁵⁰ 1 Jn 3, 14.

The Decisive Moment

Balthasar is aware of the task which faces the Christian. At a decisive moment, the Christian disciple shall bear witness to Christ crucified. The first idea, here, involves a personal call or the mission of the Christian.⁵¹ This signifies the “form” of Christian discipleship. He explains that the mission of Christians consists of performing the act of affirming Being in a night which is deeper than that of the later middle Ages.⁵² This should be done unperturbed by the darkness and the distortion, in a way that is vicarious and representative for all humanity. He says:

[It is] an act which is at first theological, but which contains within itself the whole dimension of the metaphysical act of the affirmation of Being. [...] In so far as they are to shine “like the stars in the sky”, they are also entrusted with the task of bringing light to those areas of Being which are in darkness so that its primal light may shine anew not only upon them but also upon the whole world; for it is only in this light that man can walk in accordance with what he is truly called to be.⁵³

By virtue of his creation, says Balthasar, a human being is predisposed to concretise his relationship to God, and in so doing actually comes to have an encounter with God – the fruit of which being the consciousness of a personal calling or mission in the world. In *The Christian State of Life* Balthasar writes, “that the grace of the Christian state is never granted except in the form of mission, in which is contained all the meaningfulness of this state.”⁵⁴ The Son of God lived, was crucified and died to carry out a mission received from the Father in the Spirit.

“In my soul, Christ seeks the will of the Father and the Father seeks the image of the Son. When both of them meet there, my soul is full of the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁵ The encounter of the human person with Jesus Christ becomes an extended experience of mission. “The Christian like Christ, becomes one sent: ‘As the Father sent me, so I send you’ (Jn

⁵¹ Mission, as Balthasar understands it, is close to what people in the Christian tradition mean by the terms “calling” or “vocation.” See Victoria S. Harrison, “Personal Identity and Integration: Von Balthasar’s Phenomenology of Human Holiness,” *The Heythrop Journal* 40 (1999): 435.

⁵² See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 5:648.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco, 1983), 221.

⁵⁵ Von Balthasar, *The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms*, 98.

20, 21).”⁵⁶ In fact, “by means of the mission received, man discovers why he has been made and who he really is, since it is in mission, received as gift from ‘another,’ that he hears himself called as an ‘I’ by a ‘Thou,’ and (made responsible by this latter) called to a response.”⁵⁷

Here, Balthasar moves to a second idea. It is within prayer that one ascertains one’s mission and discovers one’s identity. He explains that through prayer, each human being becomes open to God, who then reveals to him the purpose of his existence.⁵⁸ This revealing involves the human being receiving a God-given “mission,” which makes him a “person.”⁵⁹ In fact, Balthasar holds that in order to obtain fulfilment, each human being must achieve his *telos*.⁶⁰ In other words, only when a human being in contemplative prayer encounters God does he become a *unique person*.

Balthasar looks at the contemplative no longer as an individual of the species at the natural level but as an individual entering a “supernatural” and direct relationship with God and so receives a personal call.⁶¹ Balthasar adds that he reserves the “concept ‘person’ for the supernatural uniqueness of the man who has been called into a relationship of intimacy with God,” and that “every human being can share this distinction.”⁶² Balthasar explains that it is through a person living in accordance with his mission that he can be fulfilled, and he does so by becoming Christ-like. Thus, it is to his unique and personal mission that a person

is to commit his entire nature to the service of this mission; here, in this dedication, this worship (“divine service”), it will enjoy its particular, its absolutely personal fulfillment quite beyond its natural and imperfect abilities. It is this mission which, without fail, enables man’s nature to go beyond its own powers and yield much fruit. It also enables man at last to come to an understanding of himself (in faith), since the mission itself is

⁵⁶ Ellero Babini, “Form and Norm of Man According to Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *Communio* 16 (1989): 447.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 448.

⁵⁸ See Victoria S. Harrison, “Homo Orans: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Christocentric Philosophical Anthropology,” *The Heythrop Journal* 40 (1999): 280-300.

⁵⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* (San Francisco, 1992), 3:207.

⁶⁰ See Hans Urs von Balthasar holds that each human individual has a *telos*. Harrison explains that this view is derived from his study of patristics, and is essentially Christological.

⁶¹ See Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 2:402.

⁶² Ibid.

christoform, exhibiting the character of the Word, the Logos. In obeying his calling a person fulfils his essence, although he would never have been able to discover this, his own archetype and ideal within himself, in his nature, by descending into the centre of his natural being, his superego, his subconscious or superconscious, by studying his predispositions, yearnings, talents, his potential.⁶³

A person's mission possesses "a Christ-like form, a form corresponding to the word or logos." Here, Balthasar uses the term "form" to mean "the ideal archetypal image, in Christ, of the redeemed and believing man, and, therefore, also his true individual self, according to which the Father now looks upon and appraises him, and by which he, as believer, is summoned to live."⁶⁴

A third point concerns conforming one's life to Christ in a radical way. To be sure, Balthasar's sense of his own mission in life determined his approach to Christology.⁶⁵ He never thought of himself as a systematic theologian, and even his work as a publisher, translator, and spiritual writer could only be secondary in his life. Whatever he wrote, therefore, would need to serve this purpose of nourishing conformity to Christ in the midst of the world. At the centre of his work is

the task of renewing the Church through the formation of new communities which unite the radical Christian life of conformity to the evangelical counsels of Jesus with existence in the midst of the world, whether by practising secular professions, or through the ministerial priesthood to give new life to living communities. All my activity as a writer is subordinate to this task.⁶⁶

In becoming conformed to Christ, the Christian has Christ formed within him. Mark A. McIntosh explains that life according to Christ takes place within the vast drama of salvation which the community's doctrines sketch out epigrammatically, and the doctrines themselves are expressed in terms and patterns drawn from

⁶³ Von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 59-60.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 48.

⁶⁵ See McIntosh, *Christology from Within*, 3.

⁶⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Another Ten Years - 1975," in *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. John Riches (Edinburgh, 1986), 223.

spiritual life.⁶⁷ Hence, there is a kind of correlation theology present in Balthasar's Christology in which human journeying and Christian faith are connected. With regard to this, John O'Donnell explains that in the act of faith, Christ impresses his form upon the believer.⁶⁸

For Balthasar, faith is not in the first instance an act of the mind. In other words, faith is not primarily a "believing that." Rather, it is an act of the whole person, an act of surrender of one's whole existence to God in Christ.⁶⁹ "The life of man reaches fulfilment through a succession of many deaths."⁷⁰ By this surrender, the person hands over his whole being to Christ. He adds that faith is in no way preoccupied with itself. He says: "Although faith in this sense is the most personal act imaginable and therefore an intensely personal experience in which one knows the Lord, it is in no sense a self-centred or introspective act ... Faith is an act of expropriation, wholly centred on another, namely on Christ."⁷¹

Balthasar insists that everything is founded upon the suspension of having let gone of oneself and of existing only in the flight towards the goal. It follows, therefore, that faith can never be separated from obedience. Just as Christ's form was his abiding openness to the will of the Father, so the Christian's being, informed by Christ, consists in his radical availability to do the will of the Father. The subject and the object become so united in the act of faith that the believer becomes Christo-formic.⁷²

A fourth point in Balthasar's reflection concerns Mary who like Christ her son lived up to her decisive moment. He identifies Mary as the exemplary model to be impressed with Christ's form. O'Donnell comments that recalling the patristic tradition that Mary conceived Christ in her heart by faith before she conceived him in her womb, Balthasar notes that the believer presents God with an active reception that is analogous to the woman's active receptivity in accepting the male seed to beget a child. Hence, this active receptivity enables the believer to be impressed with Christ's form. So, conforming to

⁶⁷ See McIntosh, *Christology from Within*, 4.

⁶⁸ See John O'Donnell, *Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York, 1991), 22.

⁶⁹ See John O'Donnell, "Hans Urs von Balthasar: The Form of his Theology," in Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work, ed. David L. Schindler (San Francisco, 1991), 219.

⁷⁰ Von Balthasar, *The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms*, 45.

⁷¹ O'Donnell, "Hans Urs von Balthasar: The Form of his Theology," 219.

⁷² See O'Donnell, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 22.

Christ, or rather participating in Christ's form of existence, points to the receptivity to let God do in the believer whatever he will.⁷³ In this sense, Mary is "expropriated" to belong to Christ.

Totally "expropriated," as Balthasar says, Mary plays the unique role in history God has for her, and in this she is totally free. She lives outside herself, not making her own limited plans but rather, from the annunciation onward in the mystery of God opening up in Jesus Christ, a journey of unforeseen horizons for her in relation to humanity. Balthasar says: "In her uniqueness, she encounters in a way which does not eliminate her history, her corporality, her world but rather fulfils and surpasses her dreams. Her yes to God is one of perfect love. She delivers herself over to God."⁷⁴

The decisive moment can be understood in terms of accomplishing the will of God. In this final point, we see that to Balthasar, faith is an experience consisting in being taken out of oneself and in being grasped by another.⁷⁵ The Swiss theologian holds that in being expropriated, or turning away from the ego, in faith, the person will be ready for whatever renunciation God may demand. Faith should lead every Christian toward mysticism in the sense of an ever deeper insertion into the mystery which is Christ. Referring to "conformity to Christ," Balthasar means conformation both to the divine and, at the same time, to the human aspect of Christ.

In so doing, he accords greater weight to the human aspect of Christ than many previous theologians. This gives what would appear to many a markedly anthropocentric character to his model of human holiness. And this is reinforced by his conception of human holiness, which centres on the right *human* relationship to Christ - the relationship of "conformity." Moreover, it means performing God's will. However, Balthasar clarifies that carrying out God's will is not a human achievement. In a footnote, O'Donnell comments that in helping Adrienne von Speyr to pray the Lord's prayer, Balthasar clarifies that "praying 'thy will be done' is an opening of ourselves to what God wishes to do in us."⁷⁶ Likewise, conformity to Christ only comes about by the

⁷³ See O'Donnell, "Hans Urs von Balthasar: The Form of his Theology," 219.

⁷⁴ Brendan Leahy, *The Marian Profile* (New York, 2000), 47.

⁷⁵ See O'Donnell, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 24.

⁷⁶ See Ibid, 8. Von Balthasar reports as follows: "When I showed her that the expression Thy will be done does not mean we offer God what we are able to do ourselves, but rather that we offer him our willingness to let what he does take over our lives and move us anywhere at will, it was as though

showing of total obedience to Christ, not just in thought but also in action. The next section deals with the values of obedience and surrender in the life of the Christian. This is indeed a challenge which every Christian faces at some decisive moment.

Purified by Fire

There is yet another key element in the life of the Christian. For Balthasar, the task of contemplating and conforming one's life to Christ is not merely a speculative one. It is rather a "hard test" in which the Christian is "tested by fire". He explains that Christian witness does not stop with contemplation. The Christian at the decisive moment is called to respond in obedience and surrender. The call to Christian witness and to perfection consists in a faithful and loving response to God's call. It is this process that purifies the Christian. He says:

All this will, of course, prove a hard test for Christians; if they want to be the teachers of our time, then they must learn to read the signs of the times. This age cannot be purified by fire if Christians are not ready to allow themselves to be tested in the same fire to see whether they are made of gold or of potash, whether their hearts and their work are of "gold, silver and precious stones" or of "wood, hay and straw" (1 Cor 3,13). This is the ultimate truth: that Christians, as guardians of a metaphysics of the whole person in an age which has forgotten both Being and God, are entrusted with the weighty responsibility of leading this metaphysics of wholeness through that same fire.⁷⁷

The love of Christ, in his view, requires not only the observance of the commandments but the following of the evangelical counsels, which are nothing but the form of Christ's redeeming love.⁷⁸ Bearing in mind that the experience of Christ is archetypal, it is at once "inimitable and what must be imitated."⁷⁹

This introduces us to a second idea that the Son's obedience to the will of the Father is more than the example and model of human behaviour before God. He explains that

I had inadvertently touched a light switch that at one flick turned on all the lights in the hall." See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr* (San Francisco, 1981), 31.

⁷⁷ Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 1:654-655.

⁷⁸ See Avery Dulles, "The Ignatian Charism and Contemporary Theology," *America* (26 April 1997): 21.

⁷⁹ Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 1:304.

the obedience of Jesus, an obedience even unto death, reveals a new image of God. It is the manifestation of God's love for us, "but more than that, it is the image of divine love itself appearing."⁸⁰ This occurs in the kenosis (self-emptying)⁸¹ of Christ. Through the identity of word and deed, Jesus points to an author of his mission, and thus reveals God as Trinity. He says:

For it is precisely in the Kenosis of Christ (and nowhere else) that the *inner* majesty of God's love appears, of God who 'is love'⁸² and therefore a trinity. The Trinity, though to our reason an unapproachable light, is the one hypothesis which clarifies the phenomenon of Christ as he is present in present in Scripture, the Church and history, because it is phenomenologically adequate and does not do violence to the facts.⁸³

It is important to note that for Balthasar, this action of self-emptying involves all three Persons of the Trinity. It is not the case of the Father imposing on his Son the burden of negativity found in the sin of the world. The obedience of the Son is freely given from the outset.⁸⁴ Christ's obedience does not have its point of departure in his earthly mission but it already characterised his life in the eternal Trinity. The primordial example of obedience is Jesus Christ. This makes Jesus open to mission and makes him the perfect contemplative in action. He can find God at any moment, for he seeks nothing other than the will of the Father. In the same manner, the call to become a follower of Christ is in the first instance a call to accept the obedience of the Son to the Father.⁸⁵ In other words, "God needs selfless vessels into which he can pour his essential selflessness."⁸⁶

An interesting concrete sense of these criteria is found in an interview with two members of the Community of St. John, the secular institute founded by Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr. Cornelia Capol and Martha Gisi stress two criteria as

⁸⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation* (New York, 1969) 71.

⁸¹ See Phil 2, 6-11.

⁸² 1 Jn 4,8.

⁸³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation* (London, 1970), 71-72.

⁸⁴ See Christophe Potworowski, "Christian Experience in Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Communio* 20 (1993): 115.

⁸⁵ See Peter Casarella, "Experience as a Theological Category: *Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Christian Encounter with God's Image*," *Communio* 20 (1993): 125.

⁸⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *New Elucidations* (San Francisco, 1986), 44.

characteristic notes of the founders' intentions for the Community of Saint John: "obedience as following the crucified Lord" and "the ability to disappear into the Church." McIntosh comments that the latter quality is described as modelled upon a notion of John as the beloved disciple who unites the hierarchical Church of Peter with the Church of love (Mary). He goes on to say that the central criterion of authentic spirituality would be a sharing in Christ's total availability to serve God's work in the world, a sharing which is in no way self-seeking or even self-conscious.⁸⁷ By renouncing every desire of their own, Christians are best able to share in the absolute freedom that is in God. The prayer of Saint Ignatius, "Take, Lord, and Receive," magnificently expresses the sacrifice of personal freedom for the sake of living by the divine will alone.⁸⁸

Unlike other traditions where mysticism is central, for Christianity obedience to the will of God makes the saint, mystic or not: "the saint is the best apology for the Christian religion." Key to his notion of spirituality is the attitude of "availability" seen most clearly in Mary, "Handmaid of the Lord." The mystery of humanity is rendered meaningful in the death and the experience of forsakenness undergone by the Lord in his love and the glory bestowed on the Lord in his resurrection. According to Balthasar, one can only gain true knowledge of God and oneself through freely chosen suffering.⁸⁹ Certainly, the kenotic love shown on the cross draws the participation of the believer. The call to become a follower of Jesus is, primarily, a call to accept the obedience of the Son to the Father, in resemblance with, and through the Son.

Furthermore, the willingness to renounce personal calculations and make oneself available for the mission in life that God intends one to enjoy is the most fundamental prerequisite for participation in the Christian life. Running through Balthasar's works, one can discern a phenomenology of self-abandonment. McIntosh comments that this includes a general survey of the phenomenon in Christian experience, attention to its historical shading and development, and a particular focus on the theme in its Ignatian form.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ See McIntosh, *Christology from Within*, 19.

⁸⁸ See Dulles, "The Ignatian Charism and Contemporary Theology," 21.

⁸⁹ See *The Glory of the Lord*, 1:263, as cited in Peter Casarella, *Experience as a Theological Category*, 125.

⁹⁰ See McIntosh, *Christology from Within*, 59.

A third idea concerns the Christian's surrender of himself to God. This, according to Balthasar, always comes about through the recognition that life in God is the Christian's intended vocation. He explains that such a Christian is long-awaited and rejoiced over in heaven. "We need not first pave for ourselves an approach to God on our own; already and always 'our life is hidden with Christ in God.'"⁹¹

Balthasar speaks of the Christian's "place" in God in terms of the divine ideal, the true reality of each person in God. This notion is best conceived in terms of the *thelema* or wish of God for each person, which includes a strong sense of God's desire and love for the person. Describing this sensation from the soul's perspective, Balthasar writes: "I'm being inquired after; my presence is desired, needed even – or so it seems. Somewhere there exists a bright image of me, an image of what I could have been, of what I am still capable of becoming."⁹²

Balthasar qualifies this interpretation of self-surrender to God in a very significant way. Commenting on Catherine of Siena's description of "indifference as 'desire,' 'thirst,' 'longing,'" he says that this should not be conceived in an Augustinian sense of the "ontological love of the creature for the absolute God. What matters here is not attaining and possessing God, but the ardent desire to correspond with God's requirements and expectations."⁹³

McIntosh explains that the yearning which draws the soul beyond self, and so into an indifference toward particular earthly choices, is for Balthasar an eros of being which has taken on an existential, even evangelical, hunger and thirst for righteousness. Here, Balthasar explains that the human person's archetypal self is not the *object* of human seeking and hunger. Rather, that self is the *result* of the creature's communion with God. It is in this sense that a Christian is purified: "In seeking and hearing God, [the human being] experiences the highest joy, that of being fulfilled in itself, but fulfilled in something infinitely greater than itself and, for that very reason, completely fulfilled and made blessed."⁹⁴ Speaking of Thérèse of Lisieux's growing willingness to surrender even her most cherished dreams of God, Balthasar adds:

⁹¹ Col 3.3; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Christian Meditation* (San Francisco, 1989), 19.

⁹² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Heart of the World* (San Francisco, 1979), 94.

⁹³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* (Edinburgh, 1991), 5:93-94.

⁹⁴ Von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 21.

If such an attitude is not to become abstract and inhuman, this state of indifference must preserve human desires and hopes in all their vitality. ... There is no trace in Thérèse of the Quietism which simply allows a person to drown his own will in the will of God. The mystery of indifference is much more a mystery of personal love, and the exchange of wills, one which requires explanation in terms of the Trinity.⁹⁵

His call for strict adherence to God's will for one's life is itself tempered by the conviction that such an act is always undertaken as an act of love in response to divine love, as an event of joyful homecoming. Balthasar clarifies that the process of self-abandonment is an act of personal love or communion, echoing the trinitarian *perichoresis* in which one person comes to ever greater consummation in giving self over to the other, only to receive an ever greater return of love. The humanity which surrenders itself to its divine mission and true identity does not become a hollow shell but finds its hopes and aspirations growing all the more vital, active and definite.

In its heart, then, the act of self-surrender is an act of fruitful love, but Balthasar is acutely aware that the circumstances of human life often work against such an experience of the matter. So long as humanity is "subject to the law of sin," he writes, this act of indifference "will always have a painful aspect. We have to renounce what is our own since this encumbers the space in us to which God's Word lays claim."⁹⁶ With this awareness of the painful encumbrance of sin, Balthasar's treatment of self-abandonment begins to take on a darker and graver tone.⁹⁷ He argues that because of the tenacious possessiveness of sin, true receptivity to God and

⁹⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Thérèse of Lisieux: The Story of a Mission* (New York, 1954), 239-240.

⁹⁶ Von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 21.

⁹⁷ It will be useful here just to note very broadly what exactly von Balthasar means by "sin." In its most fundamental form Balthasar understands sin as the "terrible possibility and reality - finite freedom rejecting infinite love." See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Does Jesus Know Us - Do We Know Him?* (San Francisco, 1980), 33. So when von Balthasar speaks of human separation from God, he is including a general human experience of alienation but only as that is concretely instanced in particular human refusals to love. Sin is described by actual human choices against the offer of God's love and companionship, and for this reason, as we shall see, von Balthasar reckons the gravity of sin is to reach a new mortal intensity with the presence of Christ: as the presence of God's offer of love, Jesus is the event of judgement for everyone who rejects him and fidelity to him and his mission, but he is this precisely in embracing and immersing himself in this rejection, "taking it upon himself."

availability to one's mission will always entail a sense of sacrifice and renunciation. This idea brings us to the last section on the Christian's "gift" as love that connects humanity back to God.

Burning with Love

At the moment of Christian witness, the Christian is not only "tested in fire" but is also "burning with love" for God and others. In living the mission received, the Christian is called to a spirit of fellowship, friendship and communion. For Balthasar, the reality of mission is not egotistical. The mission of the Christian is "the love of God and neighbour as revealed by Christ. It can be accomplished only by taking one's stand where he took his."⁹⁸ Balthasar continues that true friendship implies a dynamic mutual loving encounter with the person of Christ.⁹⁹ "Only in Christ are all things in communion. He is the point of convergence of all hearts and beings and therefore the bridge and the shortest way from each to each."¹⁰⁰

Balthasar explains that calling another a "friend" indicates that two persons have gone beyond being casual acquaintances. Moreover, it indicates the sharing of a common mission. Being brought together, they are sent together by Christ in a true spirit of shared intimacy to proclaim the gospel in word and deed. Being sent by Christ does not result in a person's being closed and isolated. Moreover, the importance of human experience, the significance of the "other" and the transformative quality of the Christ-event are intrinsic to any manifestation of "brotherly love."

It goes without saying that a discussion of friendship must recognise the importance of mission and the experience of the "other" in both the life of Christ and the Christian. Friendship is social in nature. In a similar fashion, Balthasar maintains that "by reason of Christ's mission, the Christian state is ultimately and essentially a communal state. It is social in nature."¹⁰¹ Hence, the analogy of human friendship

⁹⁸ Von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 221-222.

⁹⁹ See Bonnici, *Person to Person*, 8.

¹⁰⁰ Von Balthasar, *The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms*, 64.

¹⁰¹ Von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 223.

provides Balthasar with a model for understanding the Trinity as a community of love.¹⁰² Besides, Balthasar sees the Church as a community that transforms the very communion of life that is God.

Christian love is always being-for-other. It is existence as expropriation and being as communion. Referring to the experience of the mystics, Balthasar contends that the Christian experience is never private nor individual but always functionally related to the Church. The "individual with his experience is ever an expropriated member of the whole and must feel and behave this way."¹⁰³ The experience is that of "one expropriated, and so, too, he must administer it as one expropriated."¹⁰⁴ He adds that in other words, this being-for-other means refusing to hold on to the charism as one's own but rather passing it on to the Church.

This category of expropriation, or better, of experience as expropriation, is then applied to all Christians and to the basic configuration in existence, of the Christian attitude. He says:

As an attitude, faith is the surrender of one's own experience to the experience of Christ, and Christ's experience is one of kenotic humiliation and self-renunciation, a reality which ... rests on the foundation of Christ's hypostatic consciousness as Redeemer. For this reason, in 'mysticism' [and analogously in Christians everywhere] every deeper experience of God will be a deeper entering into the 'non-experience' of faith, into the loving renunciation of experience, all the way into the depths of the 'Dark Nights' of John of the Cross, which constitute the real mystical training for the ultimate renunciation.¹⁰⁵

This, therefore, is the heart of Christian experience. It is the heart of the Christian being-in-the-Church. Balthasar affirms that not only in mysticism, but for all Christians, Christian experience is the introduction into the experience of Christ.¹⁰⁶ Thus, to be a Christian is basically to participate in the experience of Christ. Drawing broadly on the New Testament witness, Balthasar elucidates the trinitarian basis of existence-as-

¹⁰² See O'Donnell, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 136.

¹⁰³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 1:414.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 414.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 413.

¹⁰⁶ See Potworowski, "Christian experience in Hans Urs von Balthasar," 114.

expropriation. The Spirit who draws close to the believer and pours the love of God into the heart reveals:

The Father who from the beginning has made the gift of himself to his Son, and who has carried on this handing over of himself up to the place and condition that are ours: to the point of becoming human and of being lost. It is therefore not possible to take God to oneself through the act of appropriating him, because God is personified handing-over, and one “knows” him and “possesses” him only when one is oneself expropriated and handed over.¹⁰⁷

Balthasar shows that the logic of communion shapes all of God’s dealing with humanity. He explains that the divine plan of salvation reflects the “giving,” “receiving” and “uniting” of the inner dialogue of love.¹⁰⁸ Brendan Leahy argues that the “atmosphere” in which God decides to create and redeem humanity is trinitarian. Moreover, it is this trinitarian reciprocity which God wants to impress on humanity. He says:

The Father has created [the world] “in the Son” and for the glorification of the Son; while the Son has both created it and redeemed it for the glory of the Father, in order to lay it perfected at the feet of the Father (1 Cor 15, 24-28); and the Spirit transfigures it, not in order to reveal himself, but to reveal to the creation the infinite love between the Father and Son, and to bestow on creation the form of this love.¹⁰⁹

Therefore, the very plan to create and redeem was itself “decided upon” in the trinitarian decision of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Here, Balthasar goes on to say that each of the three divine Persons is “transferred” into the others. Leahy explains that each contains the others within himself. In other words, each finds his identity in being totally related to and containing the others.¹¹⁰ In this sense, the Church (the mystical

¹⁰⁷ Von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* (San Francisco, 1989), 7:400.

¹⁰⁸ See Leahy, *The Marian Profile*, 50.

¹⁰⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations: Creator Spiritus* (San Francisco, 1993), 3:12.

¹¹⁰ To describe God’s mutual love, von Balthasar writes of a “supra-masculinity” and “supra-femininity” in God. Brendan Leahy clarifies that von Balthasar is not projecting sexuality into God, rather, speaking analogically, he sees the Father (the unoriginated One who generates) as “supra-masculine” vis-à-vis the Son, while the Son (who allows himself to be generated in receptivity) is “supra-feminine” vis-à-vis the Father. However, von Balthasar explains that on the other hand, the Father

body) which comes from Christ is so totally united to him that Christ recognises himself in her as the fruit of his generating act:

Jesus, as the Son of God and in his divine mission, has the whole of humankind in view ... this being so, must not his human, concentrated form find an echo in a similarly human, concentrated form? Insofar as he is an individual conscious subject, he would thus find a fitting social environment; insofar as he is a man, he would find the "helpmate," the "bride" and the "glory" he can recognise as "flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone." However, all this takes place at a level that enfolds but essentially transcends the proportions of creation because, since he is *God's* Son, his complement and partner can only come forth from his own substance.¹¹¹

Balthasar holds that although the Church is in communion with Christ, she (Christ's mystical body) also has her own distinct identity. He does not see the Church as a community built on mere memory of Christ or as a social project based on his teaching. He insists that the statement "the Church is a community" is not primarily a sociological declaration but rather a theological affirmation.¹¹²

Moreover, communion with Christ is enhanced through the action of the Spirit. In the same action of the Spirit, the various relationships of the historical Jesus with his followers are continued and extended to the Church, constituting her life and structure. Thus, the Church is a community empowered by the Spirit to put on the mind of Christ by living as his disciples. Leahy highlights that what is primary in the Church is that the new community brought about by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is an active sharing in *the* community of communities, the life of the Triune God.¹¹³

Through the action of the Holy Spirit, testifying to the truth of the Son's self-emptying, the appearance of the eternal in time is made present throughout time,

too can in some sense be seen as "supra-feminine" whereas the Son as "supra-masculine." See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations: Spirit and Institution* (San Francisco, 1995), 4:337-350.

¹¹¹ Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:341.

¹¹² Leahy points out that von Balthasar refers to Yves Congar's good summary of various speculative attempts to describe the identity of the Church, "La personne, L'Église," *Revue Thomiste* 71 (1971): 613-640. See Leahy, *The Marian Profile*, 59.

¹¹³ See Leahy, *The Marian Profile*, 59.

in the constant recollection expressed in the Eucharist (“Do this in memory of me”).¹¹⁴ Thus, the communal experience becomes present pre-eminently in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The Spirit of God helps Christians articulate the appropriate response to the love of God manifested in Christ: “divine love below thirsts for the divine love above and does so until the miracle of love achieves their perfect union.”¹¹⁵ Christian existence is therefore participation in the trinitarian drama of love. Existence as receptivity then becomes the expression of the Christian form of existence, allowing oneself to be moulded by and into Jesus’ attitude in relation to the Father.¹¹⁶

Conclusion

Living the paschal mystery involves the believer’s faith-experience in a dramatic manner. The Christian catches sight of the divine mystery, experiences an ecstatic rapture into the triune communion, and is sent on mission in the world. He participates in God’s “trinitarian logic of love” and encounters the God of the Ever-more who “comes towards us, drawing nearer and nearer.”¹¹⁷ Nonetheless, he is invited to fulfil together with his brethren the will of God who is “ever more giving and demanding.”¹¹⁸ It is the communion with Jesus Christ, throbbing at the heart of the divine mystery that leads the believer face the “test of fire” and bear witness to selfless love.

The essence of Christianity, in this light, lies in the “gift” that the Christian has to give at a “decisive moment”.¹¹⁹ It is a gift given to him by God in the first place, and that

¹¹⁴ 1 Cor 11, 26.

¹¹⁵ Von Balthasar, *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation*, 73.

¹¹⁶ See, for example, how von Balthasar applies this to the life of the counsels in “The Three Evangelical Counsels,” in *Elucidations*, London, 1975, 142: “This attitude is the loving assumption of the will of the loved Father, and in an identical act, the Father loves the Son and the world, and allows the Son to bring back the world to the Father in his self-giving even to the point of death. Thus the willingness of the disciple who had been called to allow himself to be disposed of is taken up directly into the universal saving will of God. It is, in Jesus’ call, the permission to offer one’s existence to this saving will to be disposed of by it. Everything rests on the triune love of the Father: the one who offers himself turns to it as the origin of all love. And in the free obedience of the Son whom the disciple follows, this love of the Father appears to him concretely.”

¹¹⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Theology and the Aesthetic,” *Communio* 8 (1981): 67.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ See Von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, 11.

is deeply rooted in the unseen and invisible nature of God. Contrary to this, maintains Balthasar, results in the Christian who “would no longer have anything deeper to offer.”¹²⁰ The “testing by fire” of Christians today, then, is to give witness, in all aspects of their existence, especially to the metaphysical act: that is, to the act of love whose form is given in the suffering *fiat* of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Christians are to read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel. The inculturation of the Gospel which results will be a new inculturation, not the mechanical imposition of some earlier one. In communion with each other, Christians must offer their whole sphere of their life to the Lord who knocks, and places it at his disposal.¹²¹ By moving from “the disposing” to “the allowing oneself to be disposed,” Christians become types or figures of the archetypal experience of Christ.¹²² Purified by fire, Christians participate in the mission of Christ to the world: “The Christians’ involvement [in the world] has its origins in God’s involvement for the sake of the world; it is grounded in it, captivated by it, shaped and directed by it. Christians turn therefore with God to the world.”¹²³

What Balthasar wanted and encouraged very much in life may well be encapsulated in a single phrase of Saint Augustine: “Our entire task in this life, dear brothers, consists in healing the eyes of the heart so that they become able to see the essential, the reason, and goal of the world and of our lives: God, the living God.”¹²⁴ Christians are then to experience, radiate and witness to the world the central mystery at the heart of the Godhead: love alone.

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¹²⁰ Ibid., 134.

¹²¹ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Mystery of the Eucharist,” in *New Elucidations*, 121-122.

¹²² See Potworowski, “Christian experience in Hans Urs von Balthasar,” 112.

¹²³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Engagement with God* (London, 1975), 67.

¹²⁴ See Augustine, *Sermo* 88, 6 (PL 38, 542), as cited in Joseph Ratzinger, “Homily at the Funeral Liturgy of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, 291-292.